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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of friends in the lives of adolescent mothers. A total of 119 mothers, aged 17 and under, were interviewed during their pregnancy and again at 6 months postpartum. Mothers were questioned about their friendship network and their best friends. Mothers completed scales that measured stress and self-esteem. Results indicated that slightly more young mothers reported having no friends at 6 months postpartum than during pregnancy. Respondents felt that their friends were more supportive during their pregnancy than before it, and reported having more parents in their friendship networks at 6 months postpartum than during the pregnancy. Having friends who were also parenting; having supportive friends; and sharing feelings with the best friend were all related to decreased stress and increased self-esteem during the pregnancy and at 6 months postpartum. (BC)

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Adolescent Friendships During Pregnancy and Early Parenting

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Abstract

The significance of friends in the lives of adolescents has received much attention. However, the specific importance and role of friends in the lives of adolescent mothers has not been addressed previously. The present analyses provide information on the changes that occur in various aspects of friendship during pregnancy and at 6 months postpartum, using data from a longitudinal study of pregnant and parenting adolescents. We also examine how certain aspects of friendship are related to psychological well-being for these young mothers.

Background

The significance of friends in the lives of adolescents has been well documented. Friends have been identified as important for developing a sense of identity, enhancing self-esteem, and assisting one another with the developmental changes that occur during adolescence. Because studies of adolescent friendships typically involve school-based samples, adolescents who are not in school or are not in regular school programs are often missed. Pregnant and parenting adolescents comprise one such excluded group.

Studies involving pregnant and parenting adolescents often identify the stresses they experience, and the potential importance of supportive relationships for reducing stress and enhancing psychological well-being. Typically in these studies, friends (along with parents and the father of the baby) are viewed in a very specific way: as a source of instrumental or emotional support. However, the characteristics and roles of friendships in the lives of young mothers have not been addressed. The present analyses provide descriptive information on the friendships of adolescents during pregnancy and at 6 months postpartum, and the changes that occur during that time. We also examine how various aspects of friendships are related to psychological well-being for these young mothers.

Research Questions

The present analyses were conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of the friendships of pregnant adolescents and adolescent mothers of 6-month-old babies?
2. What changes in the characteristics of friendships occur between pregnancy and 6 months postpartum?
3. Are various aspects of friendship related to stress and self-esteem during pregnancy and at 6 months postpartum?

The Study

The data presented here represent the first and third waves of data obtained in an on-going longitudinal study focusing on the patterns of drug use, sexual behaviors, and mother/child development among pregnant and parenting school-age adolescents. The research is funded by a grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse. The study involves interviews with respondents once during pregnancy, and at 1, 6, 12, and 18 months after the birth of the baby; collection of urine samples for verification of self-reported substance use; and growth and development data collected from the babies.

The Sample

Unmarried pregnant adolescents, age 17 and younger, living in a large metropolitan area in the Northwest were recruited from urban prenatal clinics, school programs, and social service agencies. Because recruitment procedures included advertising, a conventional overall response rate could not be calculated. In the only agency--a large county hospital prenatal clinic--where recruitment procedures allowed collection of complete approach and consent data, 75% of eligible

informed adolescents consented to study participation. Respondents were paid $15 for the first interview, and the amount of payment increased by $5 with each successive interview.

The sample consists of 241 initially pregnant young women. The present analyses include data from the first (during pregnancy) and third (6 months postpartum) interviews; attrition between the two interviews was 2%. The analyses are based on the 199 young women who were parenting their first baby at 6 months postpartum. Thus, we are excluding from the analyses 24 young women who were not parenting their babies, 14 young women who had previous children, and 4 young women who did not complete the 6 month postpartum interview. These exclusions were made to focus on the change brought about by the transition to parenting a child. At the first interview, respondents were on average 27 weeks pregnant. The length of time between the two interviews averaged 9 months.

Measures

Respondent's friendship network. At both interviews, respondents were asked about their friendship network, defined as "people you know that you consider to be close friends, that is, people you spend a lot of time with." Respondents indicated the number of people, the number of males and number of females, their ages (about your own age, younger, older, or a mixture of ages), the number who were currently taking care of their own children, and the support expected from these friends if the respondent had a serious problem (1=not at all, 5=a great deal).

Respondent's best friend. At both interviews, respondents were asked about their best friend. Respondents were instructed to not identify a boyfriend, parent, or sibling. Respondents indicated their best friend's age, the number of months they had been close friends, whether the best friend was currently caring for her own children, the frequency of sharing thoughts and feelings with the best friend (1=never or almost never, 5=always or almost always), and the frequency of seeing the best friend (1=never, 6=every day).

Stress. Feelings of stress during pregnancy was measured by a 12 item scale. Feelings associated with pregnancy (excited, alone, tense, etc.) were rated and mean scores were computed (1=low stress, 4=high stress). The scale's reliability in our sample was .82 (Cronbach's alpha). Feelings of stress regarding parenting was measured by a 23 item scale. Statements regarding the baby and being a mother were rated on a 4-point Likert scale, and mean scores were computed (1=low stress, 4=high stress). The scale's reliability in our sample was .83 (Cronbach's alpha).

Self-Esteem. Self-esteem was measured by Rosenberg's (1965) scale at both interviews. Ten items, measuring global self-esteem, were rated on a 4-point Likert scale, and mean scores were computed. The scale demonstrated good reliability (during pregnancy: alpha=.84; 6 months postpartum: alpha=.86).

Results

Table 2 presents descriptive information on the friendship networks and best friends of the young women during pregnancy and at 6

months postpartum. Slightly more young women reported no friends at 6 months postpartum than during pregnancy (10% vs. 6%). Friends were primarily female, and a substantial number had friends older than themselves, and who were also parenting. Although the young women tended to know their best friends for more than a year, only about half reported the same best friend during pregnancy and at 6 months postpartum.

Table 3 summarizes changes in friendship network and best friend variables from pregnancy to 6 months postpartum. Respondents felt that their friends were more supportive during pregnancy. At 6 months postpartum, respondents identified more parents in their friendship networks. There were no changes in the extent of sharing feelings or being in contact with their best friend between the two interviews. However, respondents were more likely to identify someone who was also parenting as their best friend at 6 months postpartum.

Table 4 reports correlations of selected background, friendship network, and best friend variables with feelings of stress and self-esteem during pregnancy and at 6 months postpartum. African Americans appear to be at an advantage in terms of lower stress and higher self-esteem during pregnancy. Having more friends who were parenting was related to lower stress and higher self-esteem at both interviews. Having supportive friends was related to higher self-esteem at both interviews, and lower stress of parenting. At 6 months postpartum, the relationship with the best friend was important in several ways: frequency of sharing feelings was related to lower stress and higher self-esteem, greater contact was related to lower stress, and having a

best friend who was also parenting was related to higher self-esteem for the respondent.

Conclusions

Overall, the findings reveal changes that occur in adolescent friendships from pregnancy to early parenting. The most dramatic change was the increase in the number of friends who were also parenting at 6 months postpartum. This finding is consistent with other research showing that friends tend to be similar on a variety of attitudinal and behavioral characteristics, including sexual behavior.

The relationships of lower parenting stress and higher self-esteem with having friends who were also parenting, having supportive friends, and sharing feelings with a best friend suggest the importance of support groups for parenting adolescents. Despite the benefits to young mothers of having friends who are parenting, 43% of the sample had no friends who had children. Although stability of friendship has been linked to psychological well-being, the number of months as best friends was not related to stress or self-esteem in this sample. Further analysis revealed that those who had new best friends at 6 months postpartum were more likely to identify someone who was parenting. So it is possible that the detriment of terminating a best friendship is offset by gaining a new best friend who is more similar to oneself.

The correlations of various aspects of friendship with measures of psychological well-being are modest, suggesting that other factors are important as well. Because of the demands of caring for an infant, adolescent mothers may not have the time or energy to invest in their

friendships as they once did. Thus, relationships with her parent(s), other relatives, and boyfriend may be more important for the psychological well-being of young mothers with infants.

Table 1

Sample Information

	During Pregnancy	6 Months Postpartum
Age	M=16, range=13-17	M=17, range=14-19
Race		
White	n=98 (49%)	
African American	n=66 (33%)	
Other	n=35 (18%)	
In school or has G.E.D.		
Yes	n=128 (64%)	n=143 (72%)
No	n=71 (36%)	n=56 (28%)
# years in school	M=9, range=4-12	
Living arrangement		
With parent(s)	n=137 (69%)	n=110 (55%)
With boyfriend	n=34 (17%)	n=43 (22%)
Other	n=28 (14%)	n=46 (23%)
# different residences	(in past year)	(since 1st interview)
1	n=56 (28%)	n=73 (37%)
2-3	n=94 (47%)	n=96 (48%)
4+	n=49 (25%)	n=30 (15%)

Table 2

Descriptive Information on Friendship Networks and Best Friends

	During Pregnancy		6 Months Postpartum	
Friendship Network	n	%	n	%
No close friends	12	6%	20	10%
% female				
< 50%	21	11%	21	12%
50 - 99%	64	35%	54	30%
100%	102	54%	104	58%
Ages				
Younger	8	4%	6	3%
Same age	73	39%	69	39%
Older	31	17%	37	21%
Mixture	75	40%	67	37%
Number parenting				
None	128	64%	98	49%
Some	61	31%	80	40%
All	10	5%	21	11%
Best Friend				
No best friend	15	8%	18	9%
Gender				
Female	173	94%	173	96%
Male	11	6%	8	4%
Age				
Younger	8	4%	17	9%
Same age (+/- 1 yr)	122	66%	116	64%
Older	54	29%	48	27%
# months known best friend				
1 year or less	42	23%	52	29%
13 months - 3 years	60	33%	40	22%
More than 3 years	82	44%	88	49%
Parenting				
Yes	39	21%	65	36%
No	145	79%	116	64%
Same friend at both interviews				
Yes	101	51%		
No	98	49%		

Table 3

Friendship Variables During Pregnancy and at 6 Months Postpartum[1]

	During Pregnancy M	SD	6 Months Postpartum M	SD	Difference M	SD	t
Friendship Network							
# close friends	4.07	4.10	4.11	5.39	-.04	5.17	-.11
# w/children	.59	1.00	.89	1.20	-.30	1.36	-3.09***
Support	3.50	1.19	2.75	1.29	.75	1.54	6.87***
Best Friend [2]							
Share feelings	3.94	1.19	3.90	1.25	.04	1.41	.40
Freq of contact	4.03	1.60	4.18	1.62	-.16	1.89	-1.18
W/children	1.20	.40	1.33	.47	-.13	.55	-3.33***

[1] Paired t-test of difference between means. N=199.

[2] For those with no best friend (n=15 during pregnancy, n=18 at 6 months postpartum) responses were coded as never shared feelings, never had contact, and were not parenting. The same pattern of results emerged when these respondents were excluded from the analyses.

*** $p < .001$

Table 4

Correlations of Background and Friendship Variables with Stress and Self-Esteem (N=199)

	During Pregnancy		6 Months Postpartum	
	Stress	Esteem	Stress	Esteem
Background				
Age	.10+	-.06	.00	.08
African American	-.16*	.22***	.05	.11+
In school	-.03	.14*	-.02	-.03
Friendship Network				
# close friends	-.09	.03	-.09+	.02
# w/children	-.12*	.13*	-.13*	.15*
Support	.00	.13*	-.17**	.17**
Best Friend[1]				
Share feelings	-.01	.09+	-.16**	.18**
Frequency of contact	-.03	.03	-.19**	.07
W/children	-.01	.08	-.08	.14*
# months as friends[2]	-.03	-.01	-.03	.10

\+ $p < .10$
* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$

[1] For those with no best friend (n=15 during pregnancy, n=18 at 6 mo. postpartum) responses were coded as never shared feelings, never had contact, and were not parenting. The same pattern of results emerged when these respondents were excluded from the analyses.

[2] During pregnancy: N=184; 6 months postpartum: N=180.